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Moving forward

TAC people do it all: deploy, provide reachback, and support traditional missions

By Andrew Stamer

Deployments of civilian personnel are well into the fourth year, with thousands of Corps of Engineers employees having deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Like the rest of the Corps, the Transatlantic Programs Center is doing its part to deploy personnel on a regular basis to support the on-going, urgently needed construction programs.

The deployments of many TAC personnel occur while the organization continues its traditional engineering and construction missions in the Arabian Gulf, Africa, and the Balkans, and while providing stateside support to the Gulf Region Division in Iraq and the Afghanistan Engineer District.

Part of the stateside support includes the operations of the USACE Deployment Center, which began deploying all Corps of Engineers civilians to Iraq and Afghanistan in May 2005.

On Nov. 27, the deployment center marked a milestone when the 1,000th deployee walked through the door.

In late summer, TAC compiled statistics on the numbers of deployments made by TAC members supporting the global war on terror to gather a snapshot of what these deployments mean to the center since they began in 2002.

The August report showed that more than 100 TAC personnel had deployed on 173 occasions to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries such as Kuwait and Qatar to support the engineer efforts throughout the U.S. Central Command area of operations.

This report was compiled for two reasons: to quantify the magnitude of TAC deployments and to analyze how those deployments affected the workload of the remaining staff at TAC headquarters, said Lt. Col. Matt Breeding, an operations officer with Plans and Operations.

TAC Commander Col. Robert L. Suthard Jr. requested the analysis shortly after he assumed command, given the high level of operational tempo the organization had maintained for the past five years.

"The report confirmed that TAC has deployed a significant portion of its workforce to support the overseas mission requirements," said Breeding. "We suspected that was the case but hadn't run the numbers. In addition, this report was significant because it recognized the volume of work that must be picked up stateside because the mission doesn't decrease when people deploy."

Since September 2002, many people have completed multiple tours, gone over for short tours of just a few weeks, or to visit programs within the TAC area of operations, said Breeding.

While some deployments are considered short, others are for six months or longer. The average tour length is roughly 137 days or 4.5 months, said Breeding.

"So many people deploy from TAC because it's our mission and our area of responsibility ... The fact that the UDC (deployment center) is right here also makes it a natural recruiting environment," Breeding said.

Suffice it to say the number of deployees is impressive.



A team from TAC discusses contracting issues in TAC's videoconferencing room.

Equally impressive are the people who assume extra responsibilities to meet the daily requirements, said Langan. Everyday another important mission is conducted – the day-to-day operations of TAC and reach back support that aids those overseas.

One reason Breeding believes this report was significant was that it recognized those who stay stateside “because the mission hasn’t decreased.”

“Anytime you send someone over, it creates a vacuum,” Langan said. “There are heroes back here who have not deployed. They take up the workload of those who have deployed.”

On average TAC has had 14 percent of the workforce deployed at any one time, and that work has to be spread around. This can happen horizontally or vertically, Langan said. This means an employee may have to step up to fill in for the boss or take over a portion of a colleague’s work.

Deployees and those providing reach back work interdependently. The work overseas couldn’t be completed without these pieces working together.

Reach back is a necessity because the GRD and AED are set up to provide services overseas but rely on TAC for certain stateside support.

“It’s expensive to have someone deploy,” said Langan. “It costs several times more having someone deploy than having them work out of Winchester, so there’s a cost-saving piece. More importantly they’re working in this environment versus potentially being in harm’s way in theater.”

An example of cost savings was given by Suthard during an October town hall. A GS-12, step 5 employee costs roughly \$768,000 to have in Iraq. In Afghanistan, it would cost \$446,000 to have this same employee. Costs run between \$200,000 and \$280,000 to put an employee in TAC’s field office in the Arabian Gulf region. The same employee in Winchester costs about \$200,000, making reach back a viable money-saving option.

Reach-back services and business support for the GWOT mission include resource management, information management, equal employment opportunity, contracting, technical services, and program management, said Lt. Co James E. Langan, deputy commander.

The operational tempo for GWOT has been strong and steady and the effects have rippled through the ranks. This tempo hasn’t slowed, and those who stay in the rear do get to take on new roles and responsibilities at TAC.

And for those who deploy, “it’s a great training opportunity,” Langan said. “People come back stronger. They’ve experienced a lot in a short period of time. It’s like a training academy, and in the long run it benefits TAC.”